Kokua Hawaii Oral History Project Interview with **Kehau Lee Jackson**

Kehau Lee Jackson
Photo courtesy of Jackson family

Kehau Lee Jackson was arrested on July 9, 1970 as one of several persons protesting the eviction of Kalama Valley residents, prior to the formation of Kokua Hawaii. She was among minorities who helped to shape the curriculum of the University of Hawaii's Ethnic Studies Program when it was in its initial stages of development in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Jackson works as a comedienne in Australia and New Zealand. She was interviewed by Gary T. Kubota at Zippy's Restaurant in Kalihi, while visiting Honolulu on December 13, 2016.

GK: When and where were you born?

KJ: I was born in 1950, and I grew up in Papakolea on the slopes of Punchbowl.

GK: Was that Hawaiian Homestead land?

KJ: Yes, that's Hawaiian Homestead. It was a great place to grow up. I grew up in a very stable Hawaiian community, where all your neighbors knew you your whole life. It was very safe, very comfortable. And beautiful. Before the condo building boom of the 1960s you could see all the way to Waikiki and Diamond Head from the road in front of our house.

GK: Mm-hmm.

KJ: Around the time I was born, Papakolea had a reputation of being a bit rough. People usually told me, "Oh God, that's rough, what a tough neighborhood," and I thought, "Really?". . . I never remembered it that way. I know there were a lot of kids who were labeled "juvenile delinquents." But most of them became just regular working people, and it was a really lovely place to grow up. Even my older sister once told me, "I made it out of there and you can too." I didn't get it. I loved my neighborhood, the people. When I grew up, you could go anywhere safely. People looked out for you, fed you along with the rest of the family if you were there at meal times. The Hawaiians totally understood, "It takes a village to raise a child," long before it became a buzz word and fashionable statement.

GK: What did your father do for a living?

KJ: My dad was primarily a Hawaiian musician. He played the guitar and sang falsetto. But he worked at a variety of day jobs. His main job was as a projectionist at Hawaii Theatre. He ran the film projector for many years, and I spent many hours in the theater when he took me to work with him. I grew up in that theater; it was like my second home. He loved movies, entertainment, he respected talent in all forms. I think that's where I get my love of entertaining from. He was an excellent entertainer.

GK: What was your dad's name?

KJ: It was Edward Kauaowaiakea Lee.

GK: And your mom?

KJ: She was a housewife for a while and then she worked as a barmaid and then a cook. She was an excellent cook. Her father was German-Jewish. He came from Chicago to Hawaii. He was stationed in the cavalry at Schofield. My grandmother was from Maui, and they had 10 kids. (Chuckles)

GK: Was your grandmother Hawaiian?

KJ: Yes, she was Hawaiian. Her name was Mary Kepaa.

GK: What schools did you go to?

KJ: Well, I went to St. Theresa, which is a Catholic school on School Street, from kindergarten to the eighth grade, then I went to Stevenson Intermediate, and then to Roosevelt High School. I graduated from Roosevelt.

GK: Did you attend the University of Hawaii?

KJ: Yes. Right after high school, I got a summer job in the city's parks and recreation, and then I paid for my first year at the University of Hawaii. . . I only did, like, two years and then I thought well this is not really for me, I didn't really want to go through the whole thing. So, I left the university. But by that time, the whole struggle to establish the Ethnic Studies program at the University of Hawaii had started and I got involved in that. And the war in Vietnam was still raging, and there was a lot of protest and activity around that. Activism was at its height—you were surrounded, you couldn't ignore it.

GK: What did you do after that?

KJ: By that time I was really active. I started being active in high school because my social studies teacher at Roosevelt was Setsu Okubo. She influenced generations of students who became more active and aware of politics and their civic duty.

GK: What was Setsu Okubo teaching?

KJ: She taught seniors in what they called "American Problems," which was more like a history, and social history, government and democratic practice. A lot of people, parents

and conservatives—even among the faculty—didn't like her style, her encouragement to "open our eyes," her unapologetic style. She was a force, at barely 5 feet, both fiery and kind.

GK: Right.

KJ: She would bring in people like (anti-Vietnam War activists) John Witeck and Ko Hayashi to speak to the students about what's going on in the world around them—the war, the resistance, and major issues of the day.

GK: How was it?

KJ: There was sort of a gap in people's social education, especially at a school like Roosevelt. Half of the school was from Papakolea and the other half was from middle-class neighborhoods of Makiki and Manoa. She was really key in providing social education for a lot of kids. She was very radical compared to all the other teachers because she talked about Vietnam and raised social issues, challenging us to think for ourselves and act. She expected the kids to sort of stand up and say something, be something.

GK: It sounds like she wanted students to develop independent thinking?

KJ: Setsu was a great influence on a lot of the activists, both at school and at large. Setsu really opened the door. She didn't want you to be something, in terms of getting a good job. She wanted you to be something in terms of being a good citizen, in the sense of being aware of what's going on politically, socially, and making a stand of some kind. . . She wanted you to be able to argue for your side, not accept the "norms" without questioning.

GK: How did that go with your parents?

KJ: My dad was liberal in his thinking, more so than a lot of people. He would never say don't do that. He would just express his concern about it, especially if he thought I might get hurt in some way, like most parents. He didn't tell me not to do anything. But he was worried about it.

GK: When was the first time you heard about the Kalama Valley eviction?

KJ: Um, I think probably as a freshman in 1969-1970.

GK: What was happening with you then?

KJ: I was very active in the anti-Vietnam War movement, and out of that came a lot of those issues. I got to meet activists—both local like John Witeck and Ko Hayashi, Stan Masui—and national figures who came to speak at the university. It was quite easy from there to get involved in a lot of issues.

I think the Vietnam War movement gave rise toward activism and the consciousness of people. It also gave rise to leadership on issues. These young men who were going to have to lay down their lives provided the leadership. The intellectuals who were educating

people, cutting through the prejudiced "news" about it provided the leadership.

In the early days, a lot of church people and students and some GIs were against the war. There were some supporters from the ILWU who had a long history of working-class struggle. On the U.S. mainland at the time, the whole Third World movement was heating up at college campuses. Young people were coming of age in a storm of issues, and beginning to take them on.

Out of that, the Hawaiian movement began to develop, then it became strong on its own. It took its cue from a lot of those kinds of movements and we got support from a lot of that not only in terms of education, but also people, coming and lending their physical support.

GK: How did Ethnic Studies figure in all this?

KJ: We were busy trying to get the university to develop the Ethnic Studies Program, and so, Kalama Valley was a big issue for us because of the Hawaiian studies in the Ethnic Studies Program and the loss of Hawaiian rights regarding land and water use. While we're trying to rewrite the history or reproduce Hawaii history our way, issues like the Kalama Valley situation showed really clearly what had happened to the Hawaiians and so we encouraged our students to wake up to what was going on.

GK: What individuals from the mainland influenced you?

KJ: The Berrigan brothers, both Catholic priests, regarding Vietnam. I admired their courage in speaking out and acting against the prevailing conservatism. I can't remember some of the names of countless speakers and activists who came to Hawaii, but I remember sitting at the old Kuhio Grill over beer and really talking about the world. Having a Catholic background and from Papakolea, it was really an eye-opener for me. It opened up the world.

GK: Was your father a Catholic?

KJ: Yes, very much so. . . I mean we went to church every Sunday, and he sent three out of four of his kids to Catholic schools.

GK: And that's why you went to St. Theresa?

KJ: Yes. My uncle convinced my dad to send my sisters and me to Catholic school. He was working three jobs to support his family. It was going to cost him more, but he valued a good education so he made the sacrifice. My older sister and I—she went to St. Francis—we just thank God that he did because in those days, we had all nuns as teachers, and boy, you did not leave that school without knowing what you were doing. I mean they were tough broads. We received a high level of education because of them. When I got to public school, I was shocked. I had culture shock. I was, like, "Oh! I read this in the sixth grade. Why are you doing this now?" So, the nuns had high level of expectation for our education, but they also had a high level of social responsibility not

necessarily in activism, but in knowing right from wrong.

GK: Right.

KJ: Oddly enough, John Witeck came from a very strong Catholic background as well. I think that kind of drumming home the idea of right and wrong definitely influenced my ability to say something or do something when it came to social issues because you just think, "Well, this is wrong, it needs to be made right."

GK: I know there seemed to be a disproportionate number of Native Hawaiians and other Hawaii minorities dying as soldiers fighting in Vietnam. How did that affect you?

KJ: Some of my classmates died in the war. I think people sometimes talk about the Vietnam War as an intellectual exercise. They don't realize how much emotion there was. . . I even had a hard time sitting through the movie that was made from the stage musical *Hair,* because it brought back so many heart-wrenching feelings watching young men sent to Vietnam. Although I might not have known that person really well, I kind of felt that my generation was being attacked and led to slaughter. You feel a bit responsible for what's going on here. I remember when we had our first high school reunion, the organizers put the names of all the classmates that had passed away on an "In memoriam" slide and many of the young men who had passed away, a good percentage of them, had died in Vietnam. So, it became a personal thing.

GK: Why were you arrested in Kalama Valley?

KJ: In the early days of Kalama Valley, when we did the first sit-in, there was no real big movement around it. It wasn't getting enough press. I mean, it involved Bishop Estate. What newspaper is going to criticize the biggest private landowner in the state? Sometimes, you have to do something shocking; that's what you have to do to get noticed and get a wider attention to the issue. For me, it was a no brainer. It was like yeah, "I'll do it. . . " Sometimes, it's the ignorance of youth. You think, "Well, that's gonna solve things or that's gonna do something." It did, but to be honest, I don't think I really thought it through. It was a gut reaction to what I felt was happening—another stolen piece of Hawaii, another slap at the Hawaiian people.

When you see it, you realize this is life and death for people. This is not something to just write a paper on, to study dispassionately. People are going to lose their livelihoods, their homes. They will get evicted. They're not going to be able to farm. There was just no plan for taking care of these people, and it becomes a thing of, well, this is like the slippery slope now. This is where it starts, and you have to kind of do something.

GK: While you were involved in working on the curriculum and lecturing in the Ethnic Studies Program, did you make presentations about Kalama Valley to students?

KJ: Oh yeah. We encouraged our students to get involved in those issues not only to learn, but also to empathize, take part, change our history. People, especially a lot of Hawaiian students who were going to the university, had no idea what it was about. I mean our

farmers are in threat, our land is being urbanized. Where's our food going to come from? Where are these people going to go?

GK: What was the general sentiment at the time?

KJ: I think most people at that time were feeling, "Well, what can we do? I mean there was no outlet really, other than protesting at the Legislature."

I had been to the valley just to see it and all that. . . When the call came that the bulldozers are coming, you kind of feel like, "Oh crap, you know, this is like 'crunch time'. . . Are we going to let them do it? Are we going to at least delay it, and by that delay, raise the issue because no one was talking about it?"

GK: What were you feeling?

KJ: All the way through it, I just kind of felt like, "Well, I have to do something." And there was an opportunity to do something and to get the issue out and to bring it into the public forum, to educate people, and let people discuss it, you know.

GK: Where did you get the idea for a sit-in protest?

KJ: It happened at the GI sanctuary at Church of the Crossroads (on Oahu). My boyfriend at the time was the leader of that.

GK: Who was that?

KJ: Buff Parry. He was in the Air Force at the time. He was an activist against the Vietnam War, and he organized within. He was based at Hickam. . . He was an intellectual and strong organizer. Eventually, he had to flee to Canada. A lot of guys left for Canada.

GK: What other movements influenced the protest in Kalama Valley?

KJ: When the Hawaiian movement started in Kalama Valley. . . you had the Third World movements, activists like the Black Panthers or activists like the Young Lords Party. . . The Puerto Rican movement was very, very influential. Young Hawaiians took a lot of cues from that—power to the people, freedom of the people, preserving their land and housing, caring for the communities with food programs, health programs. The Young Lords were based in New York but their slogan, "Tengo Puerto Rico en mi Corazon" (I have Puerto Rico in my heart) was strong, and they got involved with issues in their home land. Like the Hawaiians, they had a native island being used for military training as well. It matched our feelings as well.

GK: There were similarities in history?

KJ: Yeah. Exactly. Puerto Rico and Hawaii were taken at the same time. We're on the same latitude. Puerto Rico could have easily become the 51st state. . .

GK: Can you take me back to the day of your arrest in 1970?

KJ: I remember I wasn't frightened of the bulldozers. We sat down, and we just wouldn't move. It was kind of touch and go in terms of whether they were going to physically come and just yank us. The workers were kind of ambivalent. Many of the construction workers were Hawaiian. They kind of hesitated because they didn't want to hurt us. . . Then Bishop Estate called the cops and then the cops were there and after asking us to leave twice and us refusing, they arrested us. You could tell that even among the cops, the Hawaiians understood the issue but they had to do their job. We got put in the cells for a little while. The other Hawaiian prisoners were there for other things, but even they were sympathetic. They were like, "Yeah okay." They got it. This was kind of a little glimmer of hope, like, "Oh, somebody is doing something." They understood the reason pretty well. And, that was encouraging. Even the female cop who was doing the paperwork was like, "Why are you doing this?" We had a good chat while she was filling out the paperwork.

GK: Then what happened?

KJ: The case finally went to court and got thrown out.

GK: Why did it get thrown out?

KJ: I don't know the legal reasons, but in the grand scale of things, trespass was a minor issue, and I'm not sure they wanted to provide a public trial and forum for us to discuss the issue, Bishop Estates' dealings, etc.

GK: Was there news coverage?

KJ: Yes, there was news coverage, but not a lot of news coverage, and there was very little follow up at that time until the movement got big enough and you had a much larger number of people. Then they couldn't really ignore it at that point.

GK: So the numbers made a difference?

KJ: I think the movement started to shift. . . People could ignore the anti-Vietnam War movement or the Ethnic Studies or Hawaiian movement when it was just students, but when unions got involved and the working people got involved and the parents got involved, that's when people in power decided we have to deal with it. . . As more people got involved, it got the attention.

GK: How did your father feel?

KJ: He wasn't happy exactly, but to his credit, I remember he told me I don't agree with what you're doing but I'm proud that you stood up.

GK: Wow. Chokes me up.

KJ: Me too, still does. He was a musician his whole life and he was just a lovely, lovely guy. But he was Hawaiian first. He understood.

GK: Did he ever talk about the overthrow of the monarchy or statehood?

KJ: Yeah. When I was about 10 years old, I remember hearing the song "Kaulana Na Pua" for the first time, and he told me what it meant; he called it the stone eating song. When we were growing up, his generation knew we were heading toward being a state so they tried to prepare us—get a good education, you have to learn to live in the new regime while knowing your Hawaiian roots. . . My dad could speak and understand Hawaiian because my grandmother was blind and as a child he had to translate and read her all her letters that came from their family on Maui.

GK: Did he teach you Hawaiian?

KJ: We were never taught to speak Hawaiian at home. It's not that he discouraged us from doing anything Hawaiian. It's just that he felt that for his children to survive, they needed to get a good education in the haole way.

GK: Why?

KJ: Around us, people were drinking and getting in trouble and whatever they did in those days. Hawaiians were in prisons, disenfranchised, always at the bottom. He wanted something better for us. It meant being prepared to live in what's coming. You know, we're going to be a state. We were never even allowed to speak Pidgin English at home. Not that it was looked down upon, or discouraged, but we were expected to be "proper."

GK: Mm-hmm.

KJ: Dad was always well-spoken, and he was self-educated because he started supporting his family when he was six years old and left school early. He was one of the younger ones in the family but they were dirt poor. They all worked 'cause they needed to survive. He was an entertainer from childhood, working with my uncles who were musicians as well. He cleaned yards for the rich haole families in Nuuanu as a boy. He was a survivor. When I was born, he was working at Hawaii Theatre as a projectionist full time; he also had a part-time job working with one of my uncles in a little shop that repaired electronic equipment. Then off and on, he would pick up other side jobs. . . He had four kids to support.

GK: Were you at the state Capitol demonstration attended by several hundreds, some say up to 2,000 people? How was it?

KJ: Yes. When you're at something like that, it makes you realize how powerful it is to be able to get your message out to reach people. They internalize it. It can be powerful. I've been at demonstrations where the energy is so palpable that you just go, "Oh my God." It's a wave of consciousness and quite something to be involved in.

GK: If you had to do it again, would you have gotten arrested at that particular time?

KJ: Probably. There was really no other way to get the issue dealt with. In order for it to actually become something that was brought to the table to discuss, you had to take some kind of radical action. There was really no other way. I don't think just more talking

about it would have gotten us anywhere. You had to kind of make that radical move to jolt people.

GK: After the arrest, what did you do?

KJ: I wanted to explain the reasons for the arrest because in Hawaii at the time, that was a really radical way to behave. It just wasn't done by local kids. People were blaming the haole students for stirring up trouble. It was important to know it was locals who were there. I went to Roosevelt High School to talk, because I was from Roosevelt. Setsu was wide open to having people discuss these issues. God bless her. She was really a catalyst for a lot of people waking up. I tried to make sure everybody understood that we were not just some students who were disgruntled but that there's an issue there and it's an issue for all Hawaiians, for all of Hawaii.

GK: So, there's a level of commitment that you had after being arrested?

KJ: Yeah. Once your consciousness is awakened, you look at everything differently. A lot of us who were involved in Kalama Valley were involved in the struggle to establish Ethnic Studies and then the anti-eviction at Waiahole-Waikane. Once you start, it's kinda hard to go, "Okay, well I've done my bit. I'm out of here." You realize how much everything is interconnected and how much the same people are pulling the strings. Luckily, you have a segment of the movement that can deal with the facts and figures and you have a segment of the movement that can provide that information to people. It's not just facts and figures. It's reality.

GK: Right.

KJ: Waiahole-Waikane activist Pete Thompson, God rest his soul, in his speeches, he used say, "You know why people don't have a stake in the system? It's because they don't have a steak in the icebox."

GK: I guess a good organizer can help people see they have steak in their icebox?

KJ: Pete would be able to put it in those kinds of terms. You have to have people who know how to present the information and to have that charisma if you want people to pay attention and understand. Pete had charisma and was an intellectual. Yet he was a Hawaiian that grew up in Kalihi and all that. He was very down home and so he was like the perfect person because he was able to relate to everybody and yet he had the intellectual capacity, that curiosity and that ability to know what to research. . . He was really quite key in bridging that gap. . . When the Hawaiians began to organize on their own, people like Pete were important.

GK: Who else?

KJ: Kalani Ohelo was important because he spoke for the really disenfranchised and he was a very powerful speaker. . . It was his truth that he was talking about. He touched a lot of people and was charismatic in that respect.

GK: Did you know Larry Kamakawiwoole, a director of Ethnic Studies, who had been a leader of Kokua Hawaii in Kalama Valley?

Marion Kelly
Photo by Ed Greevy

KJ: I met him when I started working in Ethnic Studies. He was our lecturer in the Hawaiian studies course. Larry was an educator but he had a very sort of gentle way of doing it, and that was good because you had people who were kind of, you know, a bit more fiery. He was able to sort of translate—I don't know how to put it. He provided a calming influence. That was good for us. And he was very supportive of his staff, Pete, Terry Kekoolani, me, and later also Davianna McGregor, leading discussions, researching, giving lectures, being lab instructors. Larry provided a stable influence. At that time at the university, he was primarily an educator. Around him were buzzing all the people but he was able to kind of stay the course for what we needed to do.

GK: You taught Ethnic Studies for a number of years?

KJ: When I got involved in Ethnic Studies, I became a lecturer first with Marion Kelly (Bishop Museum archaeologist). She was just beautiful. I miss her. I was a lecturer in the Hawaiian course for five years. In order for me to stay there, I would have to go back to school and get a bachelor's. I elected not to go back to school. And that point in 1975, my interests were shifting. I was doing more stuff with unions and other things. And then I got married and then other activities kind of took off.